

ISAA
National Newsletter

Independent Scholars Association of Australia Inc

The Boab tree is self-sustaining; it draws on its own resources

No. 90

September 2026

ISSN 1838-319X

Print Post Approved 100011 17

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MEMBERSHIP

$80—Full members
$50—Concessional
$140—Household
$75—Concessional Household

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Welcome to the September 2026 Newsletter

This issue of the ISAA National Newsletter brings together news from National Council, Scholarly Reflections, a review, news from ISAA NSW and updates from our members.

The 2026 ISAA National Conference will be held on Friday 13 November in the Ideas Space at Darling Square Library in the Haymarket. There is also an opportunity for international networking at the US-based National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) Global Conference, from 15 to 17 April 2027.

There are three thought provoking Scholarly Reflections. Michelle Cavanagh asks whether intelligence or wisdom is more useful, drawing on her experiences as a lifelong reader, writer, letter-writer and memoirist. Her reflections remind us that intelligence may provide knowledge, but wisdom lies in applying it with judgement, compassion and common sense.

Brian Nicholls explores the rapidly changing world of artificial intelligence in *Sympathy with Intelligence*. An unsolicited review of his novella *Darkling* prompts questions about how AI gathers information, makes connections and what its growing influence might mean for human creativity, ethics and responsibility.

Susan Steggall shares her experiences in *Independent Publishing*, offering practical advice on producing and promoting books while reflecting on the challenges faced by authors working outside conventional publishing structures.

John Canning's review of the article in *Engineering Research Express*, (July 2026) examines the constructive use of artificial intelligence and machine learning in scientific research, demonstrating how these technologies can improve the production of biodegradable optical fibres.

The contribution about the Jessie Street National Women's Library's History Week 2026 activities celebrates its long-running Lunch Hour Talks program.

Finally, the presentations, publications and other scholarly activities of ISAA members demonstrate the breadth and vitality of independent scholarship across Australia and beyond.

Christine Yeats
Editor ISAA National Newsletter

News and announcements from ISAA National Council

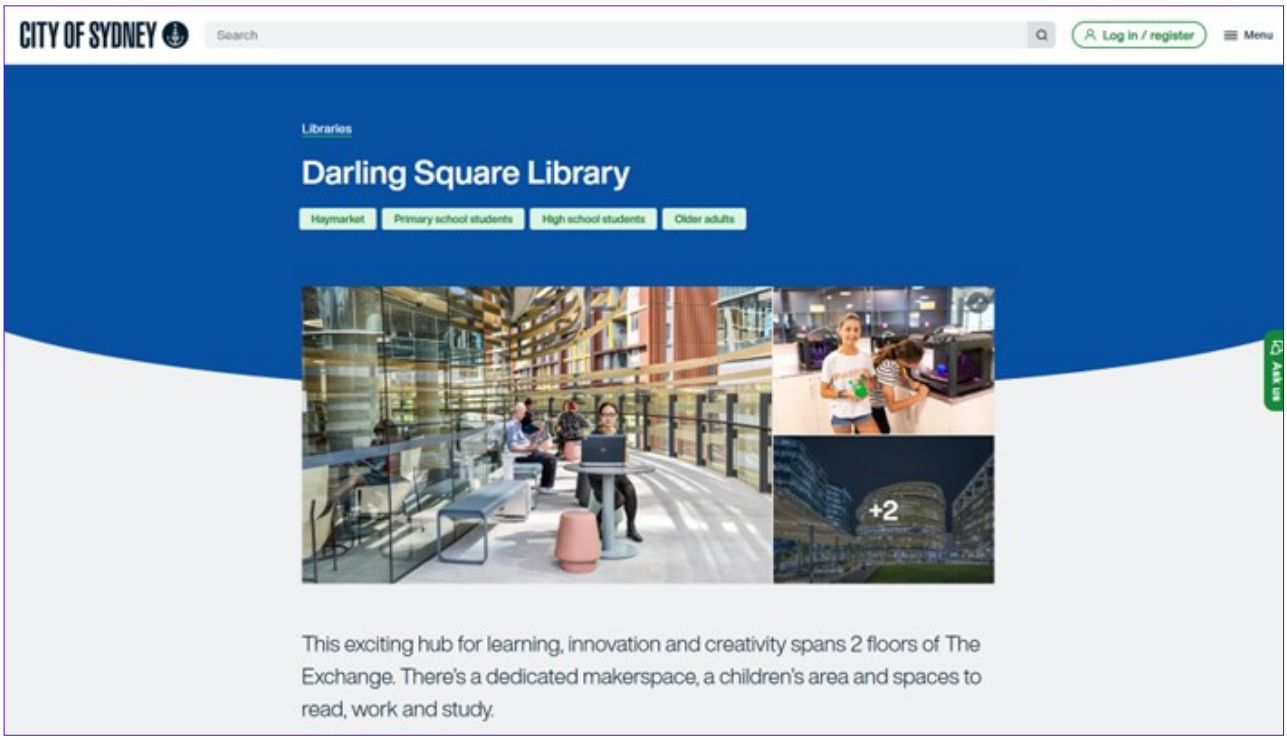
2026 ISAA National Conference Update

The 2026 ISAA National Conference will be held in Sydney on **Friday 13 November.** This one-day conference will run from 10 am until 5 pm in the Ideas Space at Darling Square Library, Haymarket (https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/libraries/darling-square-library) with drinks and nibbles to follow at a nearby venue. This year's theme is *Independent Scholarship* and includes papers on the theory and/or practice of independent scholarship and on personal experiences of being an independent scholar.

The Ideas Space is accessible by foot from Town Hall or Central stations, or by Light Rail from Central. Registration is expected to open by the end of September, and further information will be disseminated soon.

In the meantime, you can view the draft conference program on the ISAA website: https://www.isaa.org.au/conference/.

Christine de Matos
ISAA National Council



News and announcements from ISAA National Council

Opportunity for International Networking: The 2027 National Coalition of Independent Scholars conference for independent scholars

ISAA is a partner organisation of the US-based National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS), which advocates for independent scholars from around the globe.

The NCIS will hold a global conference from **15 to 17 April 2027** and has invited its partner organisations to participate. This means that if you are a current member of ISAA, you can participate in the NCIS conference. The theme of the conference is 'iResearch: Past, Present and Future', with multiple formats, from traditional papers to creative performance, accepted.

There are two main ways to participate.

First, you can decide, as an individual member of ISAA, to send your own abstract proposal directly to the NCIS conference organisers. Just be aware that, due to different time zones, you may find your presentation scheduled at an inconvenient time. It is, however, possible to pre-record your presentation.

Second, partner organisations are encouraged to set up their own panels/workshops at a local time convenient to them. These would be run as hybrid sessions – both in-person and online. We therefore invite the ISAA membership to propose ideas for our own collaborative contribution to the NCIS conference.

The NCIS is turning 40 years old in 2027, but we will also have our 30-year commemoration as an incorporated organisation, so perhaps we could have a theme based on that anniversary.

Registration costs are US$25 for one day (US$20 for NCIS members), US$55 for all three days (US$50 for NCIS members).

For option 1, please visit the NCIS website (https://ncis.org/) and complete their abstract submission form by **31 October 2026**.

For option 2, please send your ideas for a local ISAA collective contribution to Christine de Matos at info@isaa.org.au by **30 September 2026**.

More information, including themes, formats, and abstract submission guidelines, can be found at: https://ncis.org/conferences/.

Christine de Matos
ISAA National Council



News from ISAA NSW

ISAA NSW last met on 3 September 2026.

The second Work-in-Progress presentation was given by Judith Bonzol on 10 July 2026. Her paper, *Non-conformist Scottish clerics in early seventeenth century Bermuda and the beginnings of Presbyterianism in the New World*, was presented at the Honeysuckle Room, WATSO, 222 Pitt Street, Sydney.

The third Work-in-Progress presentation will be given by Christine Yeats on 2 October 2026 at WATSO. Her presentation, *Convict transportation across the Empire: Bermuda and New South Wales*, will explore the connections between convict transportation to Bermuda and New South Wales.

Planning is well underway for *The Biographer's Dilemma* workshop, which will be held on 26 February 2027. Professor Kate Fullagar has been confirmed as the keynote speaker. The Hyde Room at the Castlereagh Boutique Hotel has been booked for the event, with tea, coffee and biscuits on arrival and a light sandwich lunch provided. The cost will be $50 per person.

The Public Affairs Reading Group, convened by Christine Jennett, held its 29 July meeting in person on 21 August following an internet outage. The meeting was held in the Hummingbird Room at WATSO, 222 Pitt Street, with a $10 donation requested. It is hoped that the meetings scheduled for 30 September and 25 November will be held in hybrid format so that the group can continue to include its member in Bowral.

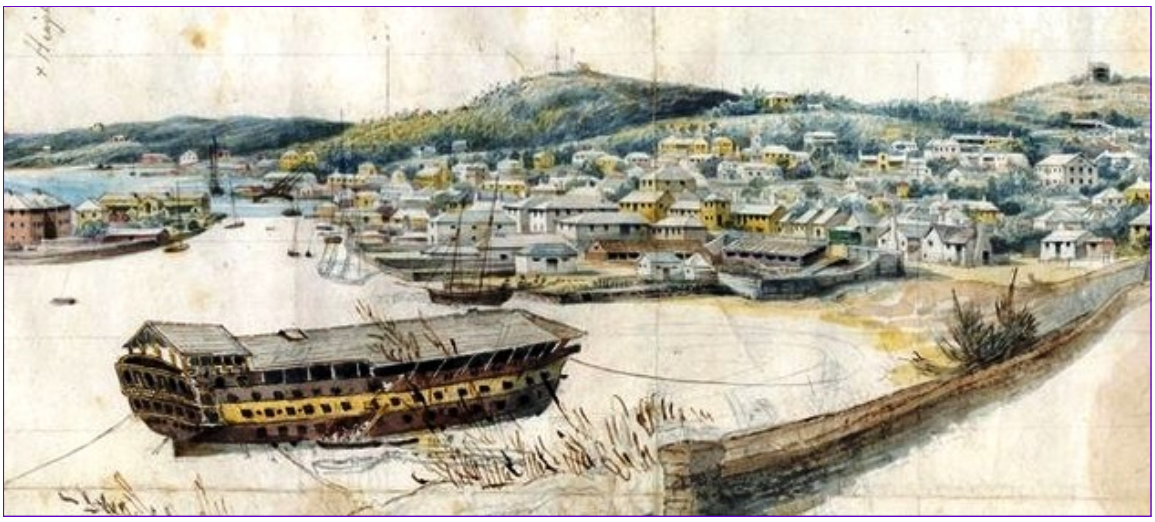
The Biography Reading Group, convened by Alice Paul, met on 27 August, with the next meeting scheduled for 29 October 2026.

Work is currently underway on the October issue of the *ISAA Bulletin*.

The ISAA NSW Christmas lunch will be held on 3 December from 12 noon to 2.00 pm at *The Alcoves*, Castlereagh Boutique Hotel.

The next meeting of ISAA NSW will be held on Thursday, 1 October 2026.

Christine Yeats
Convenor ISAA NSW



Convict hulk, Bermuda. Image: www.bermuda-online.org

Scholarly Reflections

This issue includes the following Scholarly Reflections

Michelle Cavanagh — Is it more useful to have intelligence or wisdom?

Brian Nicholls — Sympathy with intelligence

Susan Steggall — Independent publishing

The views and opinions expressed in the articles published in the Scholarly Reflections are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAA.



https://stockcake.com/s/literature-reflection

Scholarly Reflections

Is it more useful to have intelligence or wisdom?

Before I try to answer that question I should consider the differences between intelligence and wisdom. But are these really differences which should be taken into account?

Intelligence, the ability to learn, reason and process information is a collection of facts and knowledge that help you to know how to do something while wisdom is the ability to apply that knowledge with good judgement and common sense. But the good judgement and common sense we experience is so different for us all which makes writing our memoirs so important since we all come to this task from various perspectives.

Nevertheless, everyone should write their memoirs at some time; after all once you die all those memories die with you. And haven't we all, at some time in our life, wished that we'd spoken to family and friends about various moments in their lives. Remember that grandfather who told you a little about his experiences in his early life, being sent to fight a war or similar, but at the time you weren't really interested? Or that auntie who confessed a family secret but you didn't take too much notice at the time? Or a friend who divulged something of their long gone misspent youth? Maybe you were just too young yourself or inexperienced in the ways of the world to be as interested as you should have been. Amazingly you often find out things you didn't know even about close friends or relatives when you attend their funerals.

All of which prompted me to begin delving into what will eventually be a book for various family and friends. It began some time ago when one of my daughters bought me Carmel Bird's book *Writing the Story of Your Life* so I began such a journey. Having a few skeletons in the closet I've found that documenting my life has been very cathartic and amazingly, I have learnt things about myself which I never really understood, and probably still don't. While it took me a while to get started on the project I'm now about three quarters into what will be the final draft.

One of my earlier writing experiences was as part of a correspondence magazine which began around 1955. Known as Personal Post (PP) I joined in 1965 when I was a young mother after answering an advertisement for letter writers in either *Nursery World*, or *Mother and Baby*. In the days when PP started mothers were mostly housebound so joining a correspondence magazine, with letters written each month, was a wonderful lifeline. The first letter you wrote was an introductory letter, after which letters were written in answer to other members letters; sometimes we also discussed various topics of interest. The editor packed all the letters together sending them to the first member on the roster who was only expected to keep the magazine for a couple of days. Once read and replied to, PP was sent off to the next person on the roster and so on until everyone had read it, while replies were sent to the editor for the following month's magazine.

I'm still a member of PP although I'm at the opposite side of the world to most members. Once I migrated to Australia in 1966 I was always last on the roster, initially the letters being sent by surface mail, a concept which must seem very strange to many people now in the age of email.

Apart from myself only one other member didn't live in England; that was Jean Coffin who lived in what was then known as Nyasaland − later known as Malawi − on a leper colony where her husband worked. I've 'met' and befriended some very interesting people in what now seems a very old fashioned pursuit − letter writing.

But I've been a 'scribbler' of sorts all my life, coming to professional writing later in life as my first published book didn't hit the bookshops until 2006.

But, as all writers must read, I've been an avid reader for as long as I can remember. According to my mother − who taught me to read before I started school − as a four year old I could read the newspapers

Scholarly Reflections (cont.)

of the time. How much of that is maternal pride I don't know since my mother is no longer here to confirm that claim.

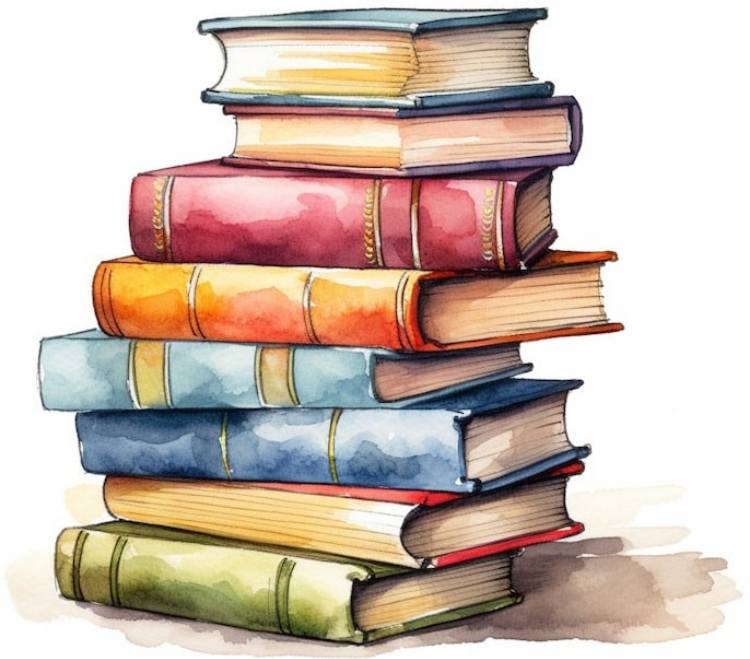
And I've kept diaries for many years; one of which got me into trouble when, as a teenager, my mother read some of what I'd written. As I'm now in the process of writing my memoirs these diaries have proved very helpful by jogging my memory.

Letter writing is also something that I've always been keen to pursue and, being a hoarder, I've also kept most of the letters written to me over the years by family and friends. Now of course such letter writing is usually done via email which will no doubt prove to be rather a sad tale when future historians are trying to piece together a life. So reading, writing and literary pursuits are in my blood.

Growing up in England, I'm the eldest of four children and the only one who passed what was known as the 11+ (eleven-plus), which was a selective academic entrance examination taken by students in England during the first term of Year 6 which was typically in September. It was used to determine admission to state-funded Grammar Schools and some private independent schools for children aged 11 to 12 years of age.

To reiterate some of my earlier comments on intelligence and wisdom; intelligence is the collection of facts and logic while wisdom is good judgment and common sense used in real life, to make good choices, stay calm and show kindness. Both traits matter, but they serve very different purposes.

Michelle Cavanagh
ISAA NSW



Scholarly Reflections (cont.)

Sympathy with intelligence

When I first read the email I was delighted. It was a review of my novella *Darkling*. It was a beautiful and accurate summary of the story, the theme, the characters, the philosophy.

> Hi Brian,
>
> My name is Helen, and I am from the Vermont Book Club. We would like to invite you to showcase your novella, "Darkling," to our readers. Your work deeply inspired us, as it is a rich, evocative, and profoundly philosophical exploration of mortality, purpose, and the human spirit. We love how you craft George Brent's journey into a Camusian, knight errant quest, weaving the timeless wisdom of classic thinkers and poets with a touching reflection on love, connection, and what it truly means to live. We would love to showcase your book through a friendly online video interview. It is a relaxed chat where authors share their work with our global reader community. We would love for you to talk about your journey of writing, how these iconic literary influences shaped your protagonist's search for final things, and the insights on life and dying you hope to leave with readers. We would be honored to host you for this interview. You can learn more about us and see our past guests at vermontbookclub.org.
>
> Warmly,
>
> Helen
>
> Helen Juliana
> helen.vermontbookclub@gmail.com

Wow! But on second thoughts the offer seemed a bit awry. And as I have inherited my mother's common sense − I checked it out. The internet warned me that the Vermont Book Club is part of a scam targeting authors, where scammers invent fake book clubs and then – once they create an author's interest – request payments under the guise of a 'promotional contribution', 'administrative fee' or 'featured placement charge'. I also read that these emails consist of generic or AI-generated praise like 'your book spoke to us deeply' without references to specific content.

But the summary of *Darkling* did reference specific content. Did AI somehow read the book? Not likely. Then I figured it out. Specific details had been accessed from my website, and a review that was published in the *ISAA Review*, Volume 12, Number 2, called 'The Last Taboo' by Monica Dennison.

But AI made some assessments itself: such as describing the wisdom of classic scholars as 'timeless'. And the literary influences as 'iconic'. Also, AI described the main character, George Brent, and his quest as 'Camusian'.(1) I did mention Albert Camus. But nowhere was the word 'Camusian' (used on my website or in the *ISAA Review*. Probably AI made a connection by a data search of the internet. But what prompted it to do this? Is AI more than just a copycat? Is this an act of creative imagination? Can AI 'think', like humans?

Theologian and computer scientist Noreen Herzfeld says that 'AI, lacking a human body, challenges our understanding of empathy and moral accountability, raising questions about the limits of artificial intelligence in replicating human experience'.(2) My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not knowledge, but sympathy with intelligence. Henry David Thoreau.(3)

'Sympathy with intelligence'. How very human.

My understanding of AI is pathetically limited. But even in my confusion and ignorance, I think we might be in for a rough ride. Who are the humans controlling AI and its data and algorithms? If AI can think – who is it thinking for? For thousands of years, the ethics, morality, laws and customs of many

Scholarly Reflections (cont.)

Sympathy with intelligence (cont.)

societies have been created by poets, writers, philosophers, politicians, academics, and even the people themselves. Will the future be shaped by cohorts of technocrats who with centrally controlled technological power reinvent the world in *their* image. Has a monster been created?

Brian Nicholls
ISAA NSW

Endnotes

1. Camusian. A Camusian attitude to life allows maintaining personal integrity and ethical responsibility while acknowledging Albert Camus's (1930-1960) doctrine of the absurd.

2. Noreen Herzfeld. Author of *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationships in a Robotic Age.* YouTube Interview Humans, Machines & Religion with Tim Ventura (47 min)

3. Henry David Thoreau. 1817-1862. Most famous for *Walden*, the story of two years living in a cabin in the wilderness. Remembered as a pioneering naturalist, philosopher and social critic.



Screenshot from the recording of Tim Ventura interviewing Dr Noreen Herzfeld on the topic of *Humans, Machines & Religion on YouTube (*https://youtube.com/watch?v=nKjyRvPGtyQ*).*

Scholarly Reflections (cont.)

Independent publishing

Last year I contributed a small piece to the *ISAA National Newsletter* about living in two places in two languages: Australia where I was born in English and, throughout the 1980s, learning to live in French. So, my fiction encompasses two 'homes' although most of the writing takes place in everyday life in Sydney. Consequently, far-off Montriond becomes somewhat romanticised, especially when I think of the mountains.

The Chablais district of Haute-Savoie is situated in south-eastern France. It borders the Swiss canton of Valais in the east, Lake Geneva in the north. The Chablais is where I lived for a decade and where still I spend many happy moments in winter and autumn. My new novel *Network of Spiders* is infused with memories of people and events of those times, but the characters, and the situations in which they find themselves, are entirely products of my imagination.

Australians read books by authors from all over and settings from everywhere, but it seems to me that Australian publishers favour books set in Australia. An interesting quote: 'Senior literary critic and editor of Australian Literary Studies, Leigh Dale, finds the "distinctiveness of Australian literary culture ... part of a broader strategy of cultural assertion appropriate at times in the past, but [as] representing an 'isolationism" no longer useful.' Novels set in France with an Australian flavour are difficult to place.

After several less-than-ideal experiences with independent publishers, I decided to produce the novels myself, problems of promotion and distribution notwithstanding. I have had considerable experience in layout/formatting, using Page Layout in Word.docx – a no-frills process. Once I have completed a first draft, and worked through several more drafts, the manuscript passes through beta reads as well as critiques with writers' groups. How many drafts? You might as well count grains of sand on Manly Beach. Here is a short D-I-Y checklist of my publishing routine:

- Decision on size: For convenience I use A5, but you can customise size in Page Setup.
- Cover design: There are online programs, but I work with the designer at a (very) trustworthy local printing company. It goes without saying that a professional cover is essential.
- ISBN and Bar Code: Contact Thorpe Bowker to set up an account. Years ago, I bought a block of ISBNs so now it is just a matter of filling in the details for each new work and assigning one of the numbers available. Each format − paperback and eBook – requires its own ISBN. Bar codes are only required for placement in commercial locations.

  NOTE: WSD − ISAA's Internet provider − has been creating my eBooks for some time. I upload them to Amazon, D2D (formerly Smashwords) and Kobo.

  Sign of the times! One question that now crops up regularly when organising a new ISBN − also when submitting manuscripts or entering writing competitions − is the need to declare whether you have included AI content in either text or cover.
- Number of copies to print: The more you have printed, the lower the unit cost but storage must be considered.
- Print on demand: I am currently trying to upload Network of Spiders to Amazon − a work-in-progress.
- Promotion and Distribution: There is an increasing emphasis on, and need to have, a strong online presence: Facebook, Instagram (and its offshoot Bookstagram) and others. Also, a work-in-progress.

POSTSCRIPT: To all ISAA members. Please send me details of any new books: title, author, ISBN, cover (JPEG) and a 'blurb' of 50-80 words so I can upload them to the ISAA website.

Susan Steggall
ISAA NSW

Review

X. Liu, Y. Luo, C. Mou, J. Wen, Y. Dong, W. Chen, F. Pang, T. Wang, I. Ahmad, Z. Hu, J. Canning, G-D. Peng, 'Data-driven multi-objective optimization of 3D-printed biodegradable polymer optical fiber preforms'

There is a lot of media discussion about the risks of artificial intelligence, or AI, and how it should be used. It's easy to come away thinking there is more to fear than to gain. Whilst there are real concerns, AI is also built on algorithms that have long helped improve and optimise processes that would otherwise take enormous amounts of time. A recent example comes from the fabrication of biodegradable optical fibre where researchers have used machine learning to find better ways to make the 3D-printed cylindrical starting blocks, known as optical preforms, that are later drawn into green fibre.(1])

Getting these preforms right leads to improved optical fibres after drawing. In simple terms, machine learning allows a computer to look for patterns in data and identify the most promising settings. Layered neural networks within the code help process and weigh that data in a way that is loosely inspired by how neurons work in the brain. Together, these tools can reduce the need for the standard, yet very time consuming and costly, cycle of repeated trial-and-error experiments, predicting which design settings are most likely to deliver better results. In this study, the targets were higher optical transmission, smoother fibre surfaces and interfaces, and stronger fibres adjusted by optimising a balance between fibre input parameters: 3D printer layer height, it's printing speed and nozzle temperature, it's platform temperature, and the extrusion rate through the nozzle. Optimising these leads to further transmission through the final optical fibre minimising loss, whereas rough surfaces can reduce performance. Importantly, mechanical strength should be optimised so its strong enough to handle practical use. Using this approach, my colleagues in China identified design settings that increased optical transmission by more than 6%, reduced surface roughness by 65%, and improved the force needed to pull the fibre apart by 59%.

Even before further experimental work, the results show that biodegradable optical fibres, despite distinct processing conditions compared to bulk materials, can approach theoretically ideal material properties and therefore made much more practical for real-world applications. Further, the approach used is applicable to any material system produced by 3D printing or indeed other fabrication methods. In future, similar methods could also help refine the chemistry of materials such as polylactic acid, alternatively identifying other biodegradable materials with even better performance.

Looking beyond the challenges of human-AI interaction that the media appears obsessed with, this is one immediate example of how AI can be used constructively to accelerate manufacturing, from pharmaceutical design to optical fibre fabrication. These methods are being used around the world to quietly optimise many areas of science and engineering, from optical fibre fabrication through to drug optimisation all the way to device size and loss reduction on photonic chips, a likely platform for quantum computing.

John Canning
ISAA Member

1. X. Liu, Y. Luo, C. Mou, J. Wen, Y. Dong, W. Chen, F. Pang, T. Wang, I. Ahmad, Z. Hu, J. Canning, G-D. Peng, 'Data-driven multi-objective optimization of 3D-printed biodegradable polymer optical fiber preforms', *Engineering Research Express*, (Jul 2026); DOI: 10.1088/2631-8695/ae8747

Jessie Street National Women's Library: History Week 2026

Following its establishment in 1989, the Jessie Street National Women's Library (JSNWL) regularly hosted talks and presentations by women on a wide range of topics. On 11 April 1996, the Library formalised this longstanding tradition by introducing its Lunch Hour Talks program. Carolyn Bloch, who had been appointed Director-General of the Department for Women in 1995, delivered the first of the Lunch Hour Talks, speaking on the role of the Department.

The program went on to expand beyond Sydney. On 6 March 2003, Carmen Lawrence presented the inaugural Jessie Street National Women's Library Canberra Lunch Hour Talk. The Canberra group was one of a number of groups established outside Sydney during the late twentieth century and early 2000s.

Over the past 30 years, the JSNWL Lunch Hour Talks, held five times a year, have continued to showcase the achievements, experiences and contributions of women to Australian society. The talks feature authors, historians, researchers, academics and community leaders speaking on a wide range of topics relating to women's history, culture, social justice and contemporary issues.

Open to members and the wider public, the talks provide an opportunity to hear from leading speakers while supporting the Library's mission to collect, preserve and promote women's history in Australia. They also foster discussion, connection and community engagement through shared learning and the expansion of public memory.

As part of History Week 2026, which had the theme *Keeping Stories*, the Library showcased a special series of Facebook posts featuring seven speakers from its Lunch Hour Talks program. Each post included a sound bite or quotation from the speaker's talk. The featured speakers were Faith Bandler, Anita Heiss, Carmen Lawrence, Jacqueline Kent, Cecile Yazbek, Dawn Casey and Deidre and Chloë Mason.

Covering diverse aspects of Australian women's history, the Lunch Hour Talks demonstrate the depth and breadth of the Library's programs and collections. They also encourage new audiences to engage with the stories, achievements and experiences of women from across the nation.

Although not all Lunch Hour Talks were recorded and transcribed, the Library holds recordings and transcripts of the majority of presentations. For further information, please contact the JSNWL at info@nationalwomenslibrary.org.au.

Christine Yeats
ISAA NSW and Chair JSNWL



Members' Publications, Presentations, Activities and News

Christine De Matos PhD

Publication

Yasuko Hassall Kobayashi, Christine de Matos and Rowena Ward, 'Introduction: The Asia Pacific War Through Border-Crossing Mobilities', for special issue of *Asian Studies Review*, early online, 19 August 2026, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357823.2026.2708260.

Presentations

Christine de Matos and Cara Cross, 'Indigenous Military Labour in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force and the Korean War', Panel on Indigenous Military Labour, 6th European Labour History Network conference, University of Barcelona, 16 June 2026.

Participated in a Roundtable ,'Military Labour History from the Early Modern Period to the Twentieth Century – Imagery and Visuality', 6th European Labour History Network conference, University of Barcelona, 16 June 2026.

Trevor Parmenter AM, PhD

Publication

Tait, K. & Parmenter, T. (2026) 'Supporting students with intellectual disability' in K. Tait, M. Hyde & S. Dole (Eds.) *Diversity, Inclusion & Engagement.* Pp 238-267. Oxford University Press.

Presentations

Seminar on autism for adults with intellectual disabilities conducted for staff of ID Health Clinic, Singapore. 31 August 2026.

Appointments

Appointed Patron of University of New England Faculty of Medicine and Health Research Centre specifically targeting rurality and intellectual disability.

Susan Steggall PhD

Publication

Network of Spiders, Editions Kusatsu 2026, ISBN: 978-0-9874944-7-4 (pbk); 978-0-9874944-8-1 (eBook).

Christine Yeats FRAHS

Publication

Editor, *History* Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society, September 2026, Number 169.

Presentations

RAHS/Kiama Historical Society Regional Seminar, *Beyond the Search Box: Mastering Trove & evaluating newspaper evidence* and *HLRV: Searching for individuals & their land holdings*, 18 July 2026.

Cape Banks Family History Society – *Irish convicts: resources hidden in 'plain sight'*, 8 August 2026.

Contributions to the ISAA Newsletter in 2026

The deadlines for contributions to the ISAA National Newsletter in 2026 will be:

6 November

